

3. The Meaning and Challenge of St. Thomas's Metaphysical Concept of God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* Today

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to investigate briefly the meaning and challenge of the traditional metaphysical concept of God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274), in the particular sense that there is no real distinction between being (*esse* or act of existing) and essence in God.¹ “God is the only being in which the union of potential and realization, the composition of essence and existence, disappears. This composition is not needed here because God is existence itself.”² Here, we are at the very heart of St. Thomas’s thinking. Indeed, *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, i.e., Subsistent Being Itself, Self-Subsistent Existence,³ or Subsistent Act of Existing or Existence Itself,⁴ may be looked upon as the very key which can lead us through the whole of St. Thomas’s onto-theological philosophy⁵ or theology.⁶ In fact, according to traditional scholasticism, ontology consists in nothing other than the unfolding of the God question (*Gottesproblem*), coherently so.⁷ As *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, God is *Esse* (Existence) itself⁸ from which all other things or beings not only derive their existence, but also find their ultimate reality and meaning (hence URAM) in their existence or *esse*.⁹

Referring to St. Thomas’s concept of God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, i.e., Subsistent Being Itself, Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) succinctly commented,

¹ Cf. Gilson, Étienne (Shook, Laurence K. & Maurer, Armand A. tr.), *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2002, 94.

² Cf. Swiezawski, Stefan (Sandok OSM, Theresa tr.), *St. Thomas Revisited*, New York and Paris: Peter Lang, 1995), 46-47. Cf. *Quaestio Disputatae De Potentia Dei* (q.7, a.2, ad.1): “... est idem esse Dei quod est substantia”.

³ “Deus sit ipsum esse subsistens.” (*Summa Theologiae*, 1, q.4. a.2); cf. Stefan Swiezawski, *St. Thomas Revisited*, 44-46.

⁴ Cf. Aquinas, St. Thomas (Maurer, Armand A. tr.), *On Being and Essence*, Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949, 50.

⁵ Cf. Shen Qingsong, *Wuli zhi hou: xingshangxue de fazhan*, Taipei: Newton, 2^{ed} 1991, p. 158.

⁶ Are the works of St. Thomas as a whole philosophical or theological? This is a question which has been debated for centuries. It suffices to know here that his philosophy or theology may be viewed as a Christian philosophy in the Gilsonian sense. Cf. Gilson, Étienne (Downes, A.H.C. tr.), *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy. Gifford Lectures 1931-1932*, New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1940, 1-19; Wippel, John F., *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From finite being to uncreated being*, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000, 594.

⁷ Cf. Heinrichs, Johannes, “Ontologie”, in Müller, G. (ed.), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Band XXV, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995, 245.

⁸ Cf. Gilson, Étienne, *God and Philosophy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969 [1941], 143.

⁹ Cf. McGlynn S.J. James V. & Farley R.S.M., Sr. Paul Mary, *A Metaphysics of Being and God*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966, 219; Swiezawski, 46-49.

“in saying ‘Subsistent Being itself,’ namely that ‘in Him there is no real distinction between essence and existence [*esse*],’ the metaphysician designates, without seeing it, the sacred abyss which makes the angels tremble with love and awe”.¹⁰ Indeed, this equation that God’s Essence equates to God’s *Esse* (Existence or Act of Existing), or God’s *Esse* equates to God’s Essence, is “like a formula in chemistry which would set off an immense explosion”.¹¹ On the other hand, for those who ignore, reject or do not understand such a scholastic expression, even the most sympathetic treatment of it cannot wholly succeed in acquitting it of the charge of sophistry and illusion.¹² Nevertheless, should *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* possess such a profound meaning and incredible consequence for us as noted by Maritain, it becomes imperative that, for the benefits of many today, this meaning and consequence are duly explored. Apparently, that is precisely what this paper is aiming to explore. We will, therefore, first attempt to deal with the meaning of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* in terms of Its *Esse* and Essence, before we deal with Its immense challenge for us today.

2. THE MEANING OF GOD AS *IPSUM ESSE SUBSISTENS*

2.1 *Clarifying Esse and Ens in the Metaphysics of St. Thomas*

To begin with, there is a need to clarify these two Thomistic key terms, namely, “*esse*” (i.e., existence, or better: act of existing, or act of being) and “*ens*” (i.e., being), since they have both been oftentimes translated as “being” in English.¹³ In this clarification, it is hoped that the term “essence”¹⁴ (or *essentia* in Latin, meaning nature, what-ness, what it is)¹⁵ would also come to a better light.

As we know, sometimes *esse* is translated as “be-ing” and *ens* as “being”. Armand A. Maurer (1915-2008) notes cogently, “The word *esse*, which is here rendered *act of existing*, cannot be adequately translated into English. It is the *to*

¹⁰ Maritain, Jacques (Phelan, Gerald B. tr.), *Distinguish to Unite, or The Degrees of Knowledge*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959, 230.

¹¹ Kerr O.P., Fergus, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002, 73.

¹² Cf. Kerr, 73: The second half of the sentence is my paraphrase of what Fergus Kerr writes.

¹³ Cf. Gilson, *Thomism*, 154.

¹⁴ It is important that we do not equate essence and substance as regards God. Gilson notes: “God is not composed of matter and form. Therefore in him there cannot be any distinction between essence on the one hand and substance and nature on the other...” Gilson, *Thomism*, 89ff. He concludes “[W]e must, with Aquinas, go beyond the identification of God’s substance with his essence and affirm the identity of his essence with his act of existing.” *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁵ Cf. Deferrari, Roy J. (ed.), *A Latin-English Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Boston, MA: The Daughters of St. Paul, 1986 [1960], 358.

be of a thing, its supreme dynamic energy or actuality. According to St. Thomas, *esse* is other than essence".¹⁶ And, therefore, "[t]o translate *esse* by a noun is to reify it and to conceive it as if it were a substance or abstract essence. *Esse*, however, is a verb, and it designates, not an essence or substance, but the act which is the *to be* of the substance." Indeed, insofar as St. Thomas is concerned, "*esse* is what is most central in the existing thing. It is at once the metaphysical core of the thing's being and the ultimate reason for its intelligibility."

Further, the fundamental relationship between *esse* and *ens* may, in a way, sum up the whole of Thomistic metaphysics. Let us elaborate it in two steps. First, on the metaphysical-natural plane, Étienne Gilson (1884-1978) often said that "Thomas's metaphysics, and consequently his whole philosophy, is dominated by his notion of reality and being [*ens*]".¹⁷ Simultaneously, Thomistic metaphysics is also "a doctrine of the primacy of the act of existing [*esse*]",¹⁸ an existential ontology, in which being (*ens*) is defined in function of its act of existing (*esse*).¹⁹ Ultimately, *esse*, the act of existing, is "at the root of reality. It is therefore the principle of the principles of reality".²⁰ Absolutely first, a being (*ens*) is a being (*ens*) only if it first has *esse*, the act of existing.²¹ "That which first falls under the intellect's grasp is being (*ens*). Thus the intellect necessarily attributes being to everything it apprehends. *Being* [*ens*] means that-which-is, or exists (*esse habens*)".²² In natural reality, being (*ens*) is the existing thing (*id quod habet esse*) which possesses both *esse* (the act of existing) and essence. Every created being (*ens*) is, therefore, complex or composite, in which *esse* and essence are distinct from each other.²³

Based on the above metaphysical-natural plane, St. Thomas then builds up his metaphysical-theological concept of God as a simple, non-composite Being (*Ens*), in whom God's *Esse* (Act of Existing) and Essence are indistinct from one another. On this ontological-theological plane, one may say that the whole Thomistic metaphysics is about (a) God as Pure Act (*Actus Purus*) in whom His Essence and *Esse* are one, and (b) God's self-communication or sharing of Himself with created beings (*entia*, i.e., plural of *ens*). In fact, "[a]ct (perfection) and potency (possibility) are two basic modalities of being, because all being

¹⁶ This and the following quotations are from Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 28 footnote 12.

¹⁷ Gilson, *Thomism*, 153.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

²¹ Cf. *Ibid.*

²² Anderson, James F., *An Introduction to the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953, 21.

²³ Cf. Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 26 footnote 1.

undergoes change, passing from one state to another. Pure Act signifies absolute, eternal, unlimited perfection, thus excluding all potency".²⁴

Differently expressed, to St. Thomas, *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* is the Absolute, Infinite Being (*Ens*) possessing and enjoying the infinite fullness of His *Esse* or Act of Existing, i.e., who has all the possible positive possibilities (potencies, potentials, or potentialities) as regards His Essence infinitely realized, perfectly fulfilled or actuated, to the extent that His *Esse* is necessarily one with His Essence, and vice versa. Thus, the whole history of creation, and later salvation, is simply the history of God's self-communicating or sharing with created beings (*entia*) the infinite fullness of His *Esse*. In other words, *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* has been enjoying the infinite, perfect, highest possible level of existence since all eternity and, subsequently (but not necessarily so), desires to share Its very *Esse* or Essence with all created beings, i.e., as a gift of participation in God's perfections.²⁵ Representing the mature thinking of St. Thomas, *Summa contra Gentiles* (written during 1259-1264)²⁶ and especially *Summa Theologiae* (1266-1273),²⁷ for example, are by and large two systematic elaborations of this unmistakable reality.

2.2 God and the Metaphysical Transcendentals

It is important to note that, behind all philosophical thought, especially in the traditional Latin West, the moving force is the concept of being.²⁸ Apart from "being" itself, the traditional metaphysician of the West also examines the essence, nature, properties, or attributes which necessarily accompany "being" and thus are found with every "being". Since the transcendental notions about

²⁴ Rahner, Karl & Vorgrimler, Herbert (Strachan, Richard tr.), *Theological Dictionary*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1965, 12.

²⁵ Apparently, the traditional doctrine as regards our participation in God's perfections has immensely affected the thinking of St. Thomas. According to St. Gregory of Nyssa, "to be the image of God means to possess all the divine perfections, but whereas they are found in God essentially and as something of his own, we possess the same perfections as a gift by participation." Balás, S.O.Cist., David L., *Man's Participation in God's Perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, Rome: I.B.C. Libreria Herder, 1966, 142.

²⁶ Despite the fact that *Summa Contra Gentiles* has been translated into English as *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith* [cf. Aquinas, St Thomas (Pegis, Anton C. tr.), *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, Vols. One – Four, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1955], this "Summa is an apologetic theology: *Liber de veritate catholicae fidei contra errors infidelium*, as many manuscripts entitle it". Chenu OP, M.-D. (Landry OP, A-M. & Hughes OP, D. tr.), *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964, 292. Accordingly, St. Thomas composed this work at the request of his Master-General of the Preachers who was haunted by the presence of the Moors on Spanish soil and the hope of converting Islam. Cf. Chenu, 289. However, Chenu cautions us to see in *Summa Contra Gentiles* a work of contemplation of truth, without minimizing its dual missionary and doctrinal apostolic merger. Cf. Chenu, 295.

²⁷ Cf. Kreeft, Peter, *Summa of Summa*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990, 14-15.

²⁸ Cf. Lotz, Johannes B., "Transcendentals", in McDonald, W. (ed.), *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14, New York: McGraw Hill, 1967, 238.

the essence or nature of “being” transcend the categories of Aristotle, scholastic philosophers after St. Thomas refer to them as transcendentals.²⁹ Although St. Thomas never used the term “transcendental” *per se* in his writings, the “transcendentals” or “transcendental concepts” such as unity, truth and goodness themselves were quite familiar to him and, in retrospect, are inseparable from his analogical notion of God as *Esse*, *Essentia* (Essence) or *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*.³⁰

In other words, according to Johannes B. Lotz (1903-1992), “[t]he transcendental properties referred to as transcendental necessarily accompany being; being manifests itself in them and reveals what it actually is”.³¹ Similarly, in the analogical sense, the transcendental properties or attributes of God as Being or *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* have been expressed in terms of the transcendentals of being by scholastic thinkers. Just as any created being is never found without its transcendental properties, the Uncreated Being or *Esse* is never found without the infinite fullness of uncreated unity, truth, and goodness: “This ultimately implies that subsistent being is also subsistent unity, truth, and goodness”.³² To be sure, “God is not good or wise because He causes goodness or wisdom; rather, God causes goodness and wisdom because He himself is good and wise”.³³ By the same token, one may say that *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* causes unity, truth, and goodness, because *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* as such is subsistent unity, truth, and goodness.

Indeed, the establishment of the number and order of the transcendentals for being has always been a concern of philosophers. Even for the same philosopher, the number and order may vary from one stage of intellectual development to another. For example, at one point St. Thomas lists five properties as accompanying being, i.e., thing, unity, otherness, truth, and goodness. However, in some texts he mentions as little as three attributes as essential to being, i.e., unity, truth, and goodness.³⁴

2.3 *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* (God) as Subsistent Unity Itself

At the least, God as Subsistent Unity Itself has three meanings. First, in the numerical sense, there is only one and only one *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* in the totality of reality. Secondly, as a transcendental, *unum* or one “does not add

²⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*

³⁰ Gilson, Étienne, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960, 137.

³¹ Lotz, “Transcendentals”, 240.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, 140.

³⁴ Cf. Lotz, “Transcendentals”, 239.

anything to 'being': it is only the negation of division, for one means undivided being".³⁵ In this sense, "*unum et ens convertuntur*".³⁶ Accordingly, One and *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* are interconvertible. In other words, the One God is the Subsistent Act of Existing Itself. Thirdly, opposed to composition, *unum* signifies the pure simplicity of Subsistent Act of Existing Itself.³⁷ In Lotz's expression: "The simplicity of God is absolutely perfect. His simplicity excludes all those forms of composition that even every finite spirit is subject to; in particular, in God essence and existence, substance and life are absolutely identified".³⁸ Unlike an existent being, God is existence itself in person ---- He is subsisting existence.³⁹ In contrast with the Infinite Pure Existence (*Actus Purus*) Itself, the finite mixed or composed existence of all creation --- in which essence and existence are distinct --- are simply beings participating in Subsistent Act of Existence Itself.

"For St. Thomas, essence abstract from existence; the only essentially existent being is God. Hence existence is related to essence as actuality to potentiality".⁴⁰ One may say that, unlike the potentiality in any created being, there is no longer any potentiality left in God. God is the perfect Act or Actuality of anything truly positive and possible. As one grows in awareness as regards the pluralism or diversity of beings in life, one may begin to discover the existence of a real hierarchy of beings, as St. Thomas states that some are fuller beings than others.⁴¹ Apparently, between the two poles, i.e., God the Highest Being (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*) and non-being (non-*esse* or nothingness), there exists a hierarchy of beings, each possessing, enjoying, or being lack of a certain degree of fullness of being.

What exactly, then, is this fullness of being? Gilson succinctly comments, "If God is Being, He is not only total being: *totum esse*. He is more especially true being: *verum esse*, and that means that everything else is only partial being, hardly deserves the name of being at all".⁴² In other words, the question above may be put this way: "What, exactly, should be the most appropriate standard of measurement in respect to one's fullness of being?" It appears that, Thomistically speaking, the most reliable, perfect, and time-tested standard is

³⁵ Gilson, *Elements of Christian Philosophy*, 145.

³⁶ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 11, a.1.

³⁷ Cf. Lotz, Johannes B., "Simplicity", in Lotz, Johannes B. (Baker, Kenneth *tr.*), *Philosophical Dictionary*, Spokane, Washington: Gonzaga University, 1974, 370.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 371.

³⁹ Cf. Lotz, Johannes B., "God", in *Philosophical Dictionary*, 155.

⁴⁰ Deferrari, Roy J., *A Latin-English Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas: based on the Summa Theologica and selected passages of his other works*. Boston, MA: St. Paul Editions, 1960, 358.

⁴¹ Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 44, a. 1.

⁴² Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, 64.

what is ultimately measured against God's infinite, omnipresent, and everlasting Fullness of Being, since God is the Subsistent Act of Existence Itself in whom all potentialities are eternally actualized or actuated, to such an extent that God's *Esse* becomes identical to His Essence, and vice versa.

Fundamentally, we are addressing two kinds of existence here, the perfect and the imperfect. All imperfect existence or existent beings are participating merely in the perfect existence of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. So infinitely perfect is God's level of existence that God is called Existence Itself or Pure Act. Indeed, existence (*esse*) is what God is and what all creatures share in.⁴³ "Causal participation is how Thomas understands the analogical relationship between divine existence and creaturely existence".⁴⁴ *Unum et Ens Convertuntur* means that God as the infinite and perfect *Ens* (Being) has so infinitely actualized all His attributes or perfections in His Essence that He is identical with any one of them. In fact, all the transcendentals used to describe God (*Esse*) are "inseparably bound up with one another in the sense that they include and interpenetrate each other"⁴⁵ in God's very Essence, indescribably so.

In other words, each of the transcendentals is so infinitely actualized that we can call God Subsistent Unity Itself, Subsistent Truth Itself, and Subsistent Goodness Itself. However, we can never call a finite being unity itself, truth itself, or goodness itself, for the simple reason that the unity (between *esse* and essence), truth, or goodness, in any finite being is not infinite or perfect. In this sense, any unity, truth, or goodness, that we find in creation is necessarily a pale reflection of the unity, truth, and goodness, in *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. In the succinct expression of Gilson:

For Thomas, God is *superesse* because he is eminently being: *Esse* pure and simple, taken in its infinity and perfection... God's *esse*, it is true, still remains unknowable to us; but no longer is our knowledge of things a knowledge of something that God is not. We can now truly say of everything that is, that God is also it, and even that he is it preeminently; that the name rightly belongs to him before it belongs to his creature.⁴⁶

In other words, although all of the perfections of God as *Esse* are described in terms of the few transcendentals, God in His Essence is any genuine positive value or reality that we may identify in life. For example, God is love, happiness, peace, greatness, friendliness, beauty, wealth, except that God is infinitely more in His mysterious, indeed infinite, indescribable Essence, since

⁴³ Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 45, a. 1.

⁴⁴ Caponi, Francis J., "Karl Rahner and the Metaphysics of Participation," *The Thomist*, 67.3 (July 2003), 377.

⁴⁵ Lotz, "Transcendentals", 240.

⁴⁶ Gilson, *Thomism*, 150-151.

God is the absolute source, perfection, and standard of all these positive values or realities.⁴⁷ God's Act of Existing equates to God's Essence necessarily implies that where God is, there is God's infinite Essence. As God is omnipresent in the totality of reality, being "present to everything in all conceivable ways of being present",⁴⁸ God's infinite perfections are thus present everywhere, filling and permeating the whole of existence, as the Efficient, Formal and Final Cause of all *esse*.

2.4 *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* (God) as Subsistent Truth and Goodness Itself

Briefly, we will deal only with two more transcendentals in this short paper, i.e., God as truth and goodness. Instantly, one may ask if these three transcendentals (unity, truth, and goodness) referring to God as Subsistent Act of Existing Itself would be sufficient to describe all of God's perfections or attributes. As we know, God as Subsistent Unity Itself means *inter alia* (among others) that, insofar as God is concerned, God's *Esse* is His Essence, and vice versa, in simplicity. God, then, is Pure Act in the sense that all the positive potentialities in God are infinitely fulfilled or actualized. If it is so, God is living in the perfect or the highest possible level of existence. Evidently, to describe God as Subsistent Unity Itself enjoying such a divine simplicity is not a limited aspect of being, but is rather as all-encompassing as being itself, and consequently transcendental.⁴⁹ Cataphatically speaking, nothing about God seems more positive and perfect as a way of description.

However, according to St. Thomas, there are at least two other equally transcendental and all-encompassing ways to describe God as the ideal perfect model in whom all the potencies in God are completely realized. One is according to the human intellect or knowledge, and another is according to the human *orexis* or desire. In the expression of the Angelic Doctor:

As good has the nature of what is desirable, so truth is related to knowledge. Now everything, in as far as it has being, so far is it knowable.... And therefore, as good is convertible with being, so is the true. But as good adds to being the notion of desirable, so the true adds relation to the intellect.⁵⁰

As we know, according to the scholastic tradition, the human faculties are classified fundamentally as: (a) cognitive, which is related to knowledge or

⁴⁷ Cf. Swiezawski, 51-57.

⁴⁸ Gilson, *Thomism*, 104.

⁴⁹ Cf. Lotz, "Transcendentals", 241.

⁵⁰ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 16, a. 3.

truth; and (b) appetitive, as related to orexis or desire.⁵¹ In the cognitive sense, to call God Subsistent Truth Itself simply means at least what follows.

First, “*Intelligere Dei est suum esse*”⁵², i.e., God’s act of intellect is His act of existing, or vice versa. In other words, God’s act of intellect is inseparable from and indeed is the same as His *esse*. As God is *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, God is also eternal Act of Intellect, eternal Self-Consciousness, or subsisting Self-Thinking Act of *Esse*.⁵³

Secondly, as subsisting Act of Intellect, all genuine ontological truth and epistemological truth are ultimately derived from God. “No other being except God is intelligibility (intelligibility is the act of being), and no other being except God is intellection (intellection is an act of knowing). Intelligibility is ontological truth; intellection is epistemological truth”.⁵⁴

Thirdly, as the only subsisting Self-Thinking Act of Intellect in eternity and in the totality of reality, “God alone is identically and unlimitedly ontological truth and epistemological truth. Other beings besides God are ontologically true or have ontological truth, and in their cognition have epistemological truth”.⁵⁵ God, therefore, is the Subsistent Truth Itself. No truth, then, is so independent *per se* that it does not presuppose and depend on the eternal, necessary Subsistent Truth Itself.⁵⁶

Fourthly, living in the infinite, perfect level of existence as subsisting Self-Thinking Act of *Esse*, God is not only the perfect Efficient, Formal, and Final Cause of *esse*, *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* is also the only perfect Efficient, Formal, and Final Cause with respect to any act of truth in being and truth in knowing. Succinctly expressed, as far as our cognitive faculty is concerned, God may, then, be described as the eternal Subsistent Truth *per se* as regards our thinking or consciousness.

On the other hand, in the appetitive sense, to call God Subsistent Goodness

⁵¹ Aumann OP, Jordan, *Spiritual Theology*, Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1980, 97.

⁵² *Summa contra Gentiles* 1, c.45, n.7.

⁵³ Cf. O’Farrell, F. P., “Truth in Ontology”, in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 14, 333.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* According to T. C. O’Brien, “St. Thomas has one brief statement of the terms in which he discusses truth in being and truth in knowing. “Truth is defined in terms of conformity between a mind and a reality (being)” (*Summa Theologiae* 1a, q.16, a.2). (1) Truth in being (“ontological” truth) is the conformity of a being to the exemplar or idea on which it depends. All of being is true in that it matches the divine intelligence, its cause.... (2) Truth in knowing or truth as known [“epistemological” truth] is the knowing conformity of mind to being... The ultimate measure, criterion, is the “truth in being” of the existent on which the judgment centers. The radical criterion of truth in knowing is truth in being.” O’Brien, T. C., “Truth”, in Meagher, P.K., O’Brien, T.C. & Aherne, C.M. (eds.), *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*, Vol. O-Z, Washington, DC: Corpus Publications, 1979, 3577.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Itself means at least the following. First, “*Bonum convertitur cum ente*”,⁵⁷ i.e., goodness (or good) and being are really the same, and differ only in idea. However, God as Goodness Itself presents the aspect of desirableness, which God as Being does not present.⁵⁸ So far as God is concerned, it is evident that Goodness is not a limited aspect of Being, but rather is as all-encompassing as Being itself, and consequently transcendental.⁵⁹ To participate in God as Being Itself is, therefore, the same as to participate in God as Goodness Itself.

Secondly, as goodness is what all of us desire, *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* is at the same time Subsistent Goodness Itself simply means that God Himself, living in the highest possible level of existence, is the perfect or the most desirable Model as regards any ultimate actualization of any true potency in life. In fact, one may say that God is forever Absolute Goodness Itself who does not possess goodness by acquisition, nor has God received the goodness according to His participation in some higher goodness, but is Himself by His own eternal nature Goodness Itself.⁶⁰

Thirdly, “*Bonum est diffusum sui*”,⁶¹ i.e., goodness is self-diffusing. “For good is attributed to God... inasmuch as all desired perfections flow from Him as from the first cause”.⁶² One may even identify the goodness or nature of God the Supreme Good as eternally “the total sum of all possible perfections in the totality of reality”. “Everything is therefore called good from God’s goodness, as from the first exemplar, efficient, and final principle of all goodness. Nevertheless, everything is called good by reason of the likeness of God’s goodness inhering in it... And so of all things there is one Goodness, and yet many goodnesses”.⁶³

Fourthly, as God is not only the Efficient and Formal Cause, but is also the Final Cause of all goodness. The only destiny of all created beings, therefore, is to partake more and more in the goodness of Subsistent Goodness Itself which has been inviting us ceaselessly to participate in Its omnipresent goodness or perfections. Any portrayal of our destiny less than such a participation is, then, defective and unacceptable.

In general, the three transcendentals of God are just three different ways to depict the same awesome reality about God as regards His Act of Existence

⁵⁷ *Quaestio Disputatae De Veritate*, q. 21, a. 1.

⁵⁸ Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 1.

⁵⁹ Cf. Lotz, “Transcendentals”, 241.

⁶⁰ Cf. the description of God by St. Gregory of Nyssa found in *Contra Eunomium* I 276: I, p.107, 4-10: 45, 336, in Bilas, David L., *Man’s Participation in God’s Perfections according to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 56.

⁶¹ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 5, a. 4.

⁶² *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 6, a. 2.

⁶³ Anderson, 87.

(*Esse*) or Essence, i.e., in terms of unity, truth and goodness. In fact, God the perfect Being (*Ens*) has been expressed by St. Thomas in terms of these three paradigmatic modules, i.e., “*unum et ens convertuntur*”,⁶⁴ “*verum et ens convertuntur*”,⁶⁵ or “*bonum converitur cum ente*”.⁶⁶ In other words, Unity, Truth, Goodness, *Ens* (i.e., Being or God) are simply convertible or inter-convertible among one another.

Insofar as the *formula* about God's *Esse* being the same as God's Essence is concerned, countless perfections or attributes about God can, therefore, be subsumed under these three simple, all-encompassing transcendentals. For example, the potency of becoming forever loving, holy, generous, peaceful, joyful, happy, powerful, knowledgeable, skillful, rich, beautiful, young, and long-living in God Himself is so infinitely actualized that we may simply call God infinite Love, Holiness, Generosity, Peace, Joy, Happiness, Power, Knowledge, Omnipotence, Wealth, Beauty, Youthfulness, and Eternity Itself. In other words, as the *Source* and *Cause* of all authentic truth and goodness, God is also the One whom each created being would (a) in his or her sound intellect necessarily proclaim as the *Verum* or the Subsistent Truth Itself, and (b) in his or her genuine desire acknowledge as the *Bonum* or the Subsistent Goodness Itself. At the same time, all potency or potencies are perfectly actuated in both God's *Esse* and Essence that God is also the Subsistent Unity Itself.

3. THE CHALLENGE OF GOD AS *IPSUM ESSE SUBSISTENS* TODAY

3.1 *The Problem of Ipsum Esse Subsistens for Us Today*

Upon a closer reflection, the fact that God is infinite Existence Itself (*Esse*) necessarily pertains that finite existence itself is being sustained, permeated, enveloped, and filled everywhere through and through by God's *Esse* and (or) Essence. Succinctly expressed, we may say that “[f]inite existence participates in Pure Existence, finite becoming in Absolute Being, Limited activity in Infinite Life, time in Eternity, secondary causality in Primary Causality. Beings exist from their First Cause and tend toward their First Cause, for an existence received is an existence from being [*esse*] and from God, and every tendency is a tendency toward being [*esse*] and toward God”.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 11, a. 1.

⁶⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, I, q. 16, a. 3.

⁶⁶ *De Veritate*, q. 21, a. 1.

⁶⁷ McGlynn & Farley, 219.

In particular, as God is Subsistent Unity, Truth, and Goodness Itself in His Essence with all possible positive perfections infinitely actualized in His uncreated *Esse*, the whole of created existence itself, including every created existent being, is thus sustained, permeated, enveloped, and filled through and through by all of God's perfections, such as God's infinite love, holiness, generosity, peace, joy, happiness, power, knowledge, richness, beauty, youthfulness, and eternity. This is, however, precisely where the real problem comes in to many today, i.e., what is said above is no more than an empty, idealistic theory!

As we look around, it does not really take a thoughtful thinker to realize that life itself has neither been sustained by nor filled with all these utopian "niceties" as mentioned. In reality, life seems to have been permeated by the very contradictions or lack of fulfillment as regards the "niceties" or "potencies" aforementioned. The real world which most people experience daily is not filled with God's infinite love, holiness, generosity, peace, joy, happiness, power, knowledge, richness, beauty, youthfulness, eternity, etc., at all. The conclusion which countless people, Christians or not, have drawn is oftentimes that, if God really exists, the *formula* that God's *Esse* is the same as His Essence is just a big joke. The bottom line is that *we cannot experience it!* However profound and original a contribution made by St. Thomas, this medieval doctrine is simply indefensible against the charge of its disillusion and empty promise.⁶⁸ On the contrary, given that Maritain is not out of his mind, this ingenious *formula* is one which would set off an *immense explosion*.⁶⁹

3.2 *The Wonderful Consequence of Ipsum Esse Subsistens for Us Today*

"In the created world everything is made to a likeness of what is in God".⁷⁰ As all creation or existence is created as an image of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, what, then, does this *immense explosion* mean? If it is the lack of our daily experience as regards God's omnipresent perfections (in His all-penetrating *Esse*) that has been the crux of the problem, this *immense explosion* would simply consist in the wonderful consequence in which God's all-permeating *Esse* or Essence is being experienced by more and more people. Resembling the *Esse* of their Creator, the *esse* of countless individuals and communities would consist of God's perfections or Essence. In other words, many, being sustained and enabled by Subsistent Act of Existence Itself, would begin to be filled with the

⁶⁸ Cf. Kerr, 73.

⁶⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Aquinas, St. Thomas (English Dominican Fathers tr.), *On the Power of God (Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei)*, Westminster, MD, 1952, 90; cf. *Summa Theologiae* I, q. xl, a. 3.

divine *Esse*, emulating *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. Likewise, the whole of their *esse*, would be filled with God's Essence in love, holiness, generosity, peace, joy, happiness, power, knowledge, wisdom, beauty, youthfulness, and even eternity.

Indeed, to activate this *formula* in which God's *Esse* equates to His Essence simply means to activate God's omnipresent *Esse* in and around us, so much so that God's Essence would also be activated more and more everywhere in and around us, pertaining to one's individual being, family, community, society, world, even the whole creation. Differently said, to activate this *formula* is to participate in God's *Esse* which is the same as God's Essence or perfections. Ultimately, the consequence would be like setting off an immense explosion, dynamically exposing or activating the hidden omnipresent *Esse* of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. At the same time, God's omnipresent Essence or perfections would be vibrantly released everywhere in and around us, beyond our wildest imaginations. Analogically, the very uncreated omnipresence of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* is like an uncreated *diamond mine field* hidden deeply everywhere in creation. For the benefits of all created beings, an immense explosion is needed, i.e., it needs to be set off.

Immediately, one may ask, how can it be really possible? Why it is that so many people are still suffering so much today? Does St. Thomas reveal to us any clue as regards the means for God's *Esse* or Essence to be activated or experienced? Does St. Thomas tell us how to explore such an immense treasure? Having revealed to us that the *formula* that God's Act of Existence equates to His Essence, has St. Thomas developed further as regards the setting off or participation in this transcosmic hidden treasure?

3.3 The Challenge of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* Today

Here, on the one hand, we must give apposite acknowledgements to St. Thomas for showing us, in the highest possible form of scholastic scholarship, the ultimate beginning and end of our journey in life which is centred on *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, the *Alpha, Omega*, as well as *Esse* and Essence for all created beings. In spite of the dry, meticulous, and cataphatic expression, he has somewhat indicated or hinted to us the ways with respect to our activation of God's *Esse* and therefore His Essence, i.e., through the channels such as Christ, His justification, grace, Church, and sacraments, as well as the practice of prayer, virtues, and synderesis (i.e., the natural habitual knowledge of the basic principles of the natural law).⁷¹

⁷¹ Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1, q. 79, a. 12; Wuellner SJ, Bernard, *A Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy*, Milwaukee: Bruce, 2nd ed. 1966, 300; Deferrari, 1025.

On the other hand, we must state boldly here our concern that it does not appear that St. Thomas has sufficiently succeeded in explaining clearly or explicitly to his generation – as well as to us today – the ultimate reality and meaning of the *formula* in which God's *Esse* is His Essence, including the ways mentioned as regards its personal, communal, social and transcomic activation. This may be perhaps why, after the infused contemplation given to him with respect to *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* at the end of his life, he consciously regarded all his writings as “straw” and ordered them to be burned. He was simply unable to continue writing, leaving, hence, *Summa Theologiae* unfinished. Many may, indeed, have begun to surmise the nature of his illumined contemplation.

As Maritain informs us, human beings have a fourfold wisdom in respect to our knowledge of God:⁷² (1) *Metaphysical wisdom*: Knowing God as the First Cause, it is some metaphysical insight which we gain through and beyond creatures, by the natural light of reason; (2) *Theological wisdom*: “[I]t is an elucidation of revealed data by faith vitally linked with reason, advancing in step with reason and arming itself with philosophy”;⁷³ (3) *Mystical wisdom*: Above theological wisdom, “there is infused wisdom which is also called mystical theology and which consists in knowing the essentially supernatural object of faith and theology – Deity as such – *according to a mode that is suprahuman and supernatural...* It is a matter of knowing God by experience... Faith all by itself does not suffice for that; it must be rendered perfect in its mode of operating by the gifts of the Holy Ghost, by the gift of understanding, and, above all, by the gift of wisdom. That is mystical experience; it belongs to the supernatural order”;⁷⁴ (4) *Beatific vision*: “By an intuitive vision of the Divine Essence, the beatified creature will receive --- with no shadow of pantheism --- infinitely more than the most daring pantheism can dream of: the infinitely transcendent God Himself, not that wretched idol-God mingled with the being of things and emerging through our efforts, which pantheism and the philosophy of becoming imagine, but the true God who is eternally self-sufficient and eternally blessed in the Trinity of Persons. By vision, the creature becomes the true God Himself, not in the order of substance, but in the order of that immaterial union with constitutes the intellectual act”.⁷⁵

It is now increasingly transparent that what St. Thomas was granted by God to see, which effectively discouraged him from completing *Summa*

⁷² Cf. Maritain, 253.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

Theologiae, is a foretaste of the beatific vision. This foretaste is neither metaphysical wisdom, nor theological wisdom, since they are exactly what the *Summa* consists of. Further, it is also not mystical wisdom. As we know, mystical theology, however apophatic and difficult to be expressed clearly and completely, is still possible, up to a point, to be transmitted in some imperfect human mode. However, as the creature becomes God Himself to a certain extent in the beatific intellectual act, it is quite impossible for any human on earth to express such a foretaste, since it completely defies any human language. Having seen *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* in a certain foretaste of the *beatific vision*, St. Thomas simply could not continue writing as he compared this *vision* to his previous mundane knowledge about God.

Thinking in line with John A. Caputo, we are deeply convinced that it is “a great mistake to conflate the metaphysics of St. Thomas with the rationalist systems of modern metaphysics, to forget its essential religious and mystical inspiration”.⁷⁶ Hence, it is necessary to continue beyond where St. Thomas stops. It is really unwise “to remain only on the level of what Thomas has explicitly said and to pay no heed to what is unsaid”. “For in Thomas’s exclamation to Reginald, ‘*Raynade, Raynalde, non possum*,’ there lies the highest possibility in St. Thomas’ thought”.⁷⁷ Caputo concludes, “Behind the discursive arguments, the conceptual distinctions, the whole impressive display of *ratio* which is found in St. Thomas, there lies hidden an experience of Being. Behind the sober and cool-headed account of God and the soul and the world, there lies a profound, if implicit, mysticism. In the end, St. Thomas is properly understood only by converting the coin of his metaphysical theory into its religious and alethiological equivalent”.⁷⁸ However inferior mystical knowledge is, as compared to beatific vision, it is still possible, to some extent, for human language.

Apparently, having been profoundly affected for centuries by anti-supernatural scientism, materialism, rationalism, hedonism, humanitarianism, industrialism, and de-mythologization, there has never been a time in the history of Christianity in which an abundance of sound Christian mysticism is more in need. Did Karl Rahner (1904-1984) not state prophetically that the future Christian will either be a mystic or will cease being one?⁷⁹ Since St. Thomas remains to be a theologian of the Christian Church *par excellence*, it is

⁷⁶ Caputo, John D., *Heidegger and Aquinas: An essay on overcoming metaphysics*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1982, 284.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁷⁹ Cf. Rahner, Karl, “The Spirituality of the Church in the Future,” in Rahner, K. (Quinn, Edward *tr.*), *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 20, New York: Crossroad, 1981, 149.

extremely important, therefore, that we upgrade our reading or interpretation of St. Thomas's *writings*, in particular his concept of God. In other words, we should not just treat *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* purely as a formal scholastic concept within the medieval metaphysical and theological realms. Instead, in terms of mystical wisdom and modern knowledge, we should also re-read or re-interpret the *formula* which, unfortunately, had to be encased in a scholastic, highly philosophical expression.⁸⁰

In fact, St. Thomas "was held by his contemporaries to be a man endowed with contemplative gifts, with religious and mystical grace, and not merely with theological intelligence".⁸¹ In spite of being a mystic himself, St. Thomas, nevertheless, had to serve dutifully as a master of scholasticism, offering his thinking, teaching, and writing in a cataphatic or un-mystical form. As "truth exceeds its expression"⁸² constantly and that "discourse always lags behind what one wants or has to say",⁸³ we must, therefore, learn to hear or re-hear in his scholastic concept of *esse* the intensely Christian experience of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, i.e., the inner truth as regards the possible mystical experience of *Esse*'s mysterious omnipresence in the soul, the Church, the world, and the whole of creation. We must learn to think or re-think of God as that fullness of presence in the *Esse* and Essence of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* intimately present to the *esse* of all things.⁸⁴ Indeed, "as long as a thing has *esse* God must be present to [adest] it, according to its mode of Being. But *esse* is what is innermost in all things... Hence, it must be that God is in all things and intimately".⁸⁵

Indeed, in the true positive sense, more pertinent research and study ----- as well as mystical, wholistic, and creative thinking relevant to the modern or postmodern scientific, sociological, psychological, and cultural way of thinking ----- are needed to re-introduce *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* as the all-present God to the present generation. Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), for instance, remarkably suggests to us that "[t]he God for whom our century is waiting must be: (1) As vast and mysterious as the Cosmos; (2) As immediate and all-embracing as Life; (3) As linked (in some way) to our effort as Mankind. A God who made the World less mysterious, or smaller, or less important than the

⁸⁰ Cf. Ricoeur, Paul, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, Chigao: University of Chicago, 1984, 52-87: [Chapter] 3 Time and Narrative: Threelfold Mimesis.

⁸¹ Caputo, 255; cf. McNabb OP, Vincent, "The Mysticism of St. Thomas Aquinas," in *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1925, 89-109.

⁸² Godzieba, A. J., "Hermeneutics", in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 6, 2nd ed., 786.

⁸³ Grondin, Jean (Weinsheimer, Joel tr.), *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1994, xiv.

⁸⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 8, a. 1, c.

God we await – will never more be He to whom the Earth kneels".⁸⁶ Hopefully, this vast and mysterious model of God, among others, would be used to make St. Thomas's metaphysical concept of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* more congruent and exciting to many who are living today.⁸⁷

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As regards the activation of the very *Esse* and Essence of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, the consequence would be like setting off an immense explosion, exposition or release of the divine presence or perfections for our partaking. Since countless of us are presently living in the modern or postmodern age of *created beings without the Uncreated Being* (i.e., without a clear understanding of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*), any more ignoring or putting off the activation of *Being* (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*) in the midst of *beings* would only further put our very existence in jeopardy, reducing our being towards nothingness. After all, as we are all created to participate in the intimate omnipresence of the *Esse* and Essence of this Divine Being (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*), the URAM of all our URAMs, such a letting loose of or participation in God's omnipresent *Esse* and Essence would only help us fulfill our *raison d'être* fully or perfectly.

At the same time, metaphysically, as God is not only the All in all, but also the All permeating all, it is also preeminent for the all-permeating aspect of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, as well as the all-embracing transcosmic dimension of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* to be introduced or re-introduced in terms of sound panentheism. In this manner, we may come to understand and appreciate that *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* is truly within and around each one of us through and through, without ceasing.

Mystically, it is indispensable for *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* be re-approached or re-thought in terms of good, traditional mysticism. In brief, we need to become true mystics. Otherwise, we will never come to grips with the real all-penetrating presence of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* mysteriously present in and around us. Indeed, for too long a period, many have learned to appreciate only the active Christian life, so much so that we have largely become a people of activism in the created realm, completely forgetful about the uncreated omnipresence of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*.

⁸⁶ Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, *The Heart of Matter*, Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, 212.

⁸⁷ What I said earlier as regards St. Augustine's metaphysical concept of God as all-present being is also applicable to St. Thomas's metaphysical concept of God as *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. Cf. Cheng, John, "St. Augustine's Concept of God as the All-Present Being for the Present Generation," *Fu Jen Religious Studies*, 12 (Winter 2005), 195-242 at 240-241.

Experientially, it is also imperative that people *en masse* are being taught to do prayerful contemplation, without which no intimate, personal experience or taste (up to a point, of course) of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* is truly possible. St. Thomas notes beautifully, “Those who are more adapted to the active life can prepare themselves for contemplation in the practice of the active life, while those who are more adapted to the contemplative life can take upon themselves that works of active life so as to become yet more apt for contemplation”.⁸⁸

Moreover, in the current ecumenical era,⁸⁹ inter-religious dialogue with other major world religions should also be encouraged with respect to what is common to our spiritual traditions, grounds and practices, especially in the area of contemplative prayers. In fact, Christians who have been brought up traditionally without a firm foundation in mysticism should learn to be open to others, both intra-religiously and inter-religiously. In other words, Christians today should be open to both their own mystical tradition, as well as the mysticism in other world religions. As regards the exciting, much-needed activation or participation in the omnipresent *Esse* and Essence of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, the renewal of traditional Christian faith should be characteristic of that of a mystic’s “unshakable faith in the supremacy of knowledge, invincible optimism, ethical universalism and religious tolerance”.⁹⁰

Finally, as regards moral education, it seems that for a long time many Christians have been taught predominantly in terms of the Ten Commandments, the canon laws, and other dry ecclesiastical law enforcements. It may be time for us to approach God also in terms of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. Indeed, it is in contemplating and participating deeply in the omnipresent *Esse* and perfections of God who is Subsistent Unity, Truth, and Goodness Itself everywhere that we would find it easy, even exciting, joyful, and fulfilling, to be truly moral or ethical. To become good Christians, not only do we need to become ascetical. Indeed, we also need to become mystical, sharing or partaking profusely in the omnipresent mystery of the *Esse* and Essence of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*. In this way, we would become truly good, happily so, to our heart’s content.

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⁸⁸ This quotation is found in: Huxley, Aldous, *The Perennial Philosophy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1970, 298.

⁸⁹ Cf. Knitter, Paul F., *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987, 1ff.

⁹⁰ Chakoo, Bansi L., *Aldous Huxley and Eastern Wisdom*, Atlantic Highland, NJ: Humanities Press, 1981, 291.

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